

IJLL



Ifè Journal of LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES

ISSN 2467 - 8635

Volume 7 Number 1

June 2021



Department of Linguistics and African Languages
Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, Nigeria

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Symbolic Meanings of Colours in Cultures: A Case Study of Yorùbá and Chinese Societies

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Abstract

Since the early Palaeolithic era, colours have always been part of human life and they have been important images that have shaped the normal existence of our civilisation today. Colours across cultures have been found to influence human perceptions and their mode of communication verbally or non-verbally. The fact remains that different cultures associate different notions to colours and these values are deeply crafted in the subconscious mind of the people in these cultures. This study examines the symbolic meaning of different colours in two diverse cultures and societies while understanding that colours hold strong expressive connotations and psychological differences. Data for this research work were obtained through critical case sampling and content analysis was used to study this work. Certain factors such as mythical, religious, historical and cultural meanings were selected for this work. This study adopts the symbolic interactionism theory as conceived by George Herbert Mead. Symbolic interactionists centre their attention on how culture is sustained through symbols, values, norms, ideas and objects because they are core elements in which humans use to reinforce and create social realities. Therefore, this work argues that symbolic connotations of colours are universal and are reinforced through human social interaction and their perceptions. It concludes that colours as societal symbols have a large influence on human behaviour and beliefs thereby influencing societal actions and values.

Keywords: Symbols, Values, Norms, Ideas and Objects

Introduction

Human civilisation has been made up of symbols. Everywhere we go there is one form of symbol or another form of it. Some of them, we are aware of it and others we are unconscious of it. Every human activity is deeply engraved with symbols or they are designed around them, therefore our lives have learnt to live with symbols and to learn their implicit or explicit meaning. The process of learning about symbols therefore creates for us an identity which invariably constructs our own cultural group or association. In this manner, symbols become knowledge and they are passed down from generation to generation, new ones are created and others are recreated with the realities of modern time. The fact remains that symbols are entrenched with meaning and they have become strong elements of human life.

This research work is located within the precincts of symbolic meaning of colours in cultures. Over the years, symbols have had different proposition in various disciplinary studies, they have examined and investigated its impact on representation and expressions in cultures and their findings have contributed to the understanding of human thoughts, relationships and societal formations. Some disciplinary scholars such as Firth (2011) & Cassirer (2012) have both posited that symbols are widely used to explain and offer great insights about the world which might be of secretive nature or transcendent. Cassirer (2012) further defined a symbol as a widely accepted approach of comprehending the intricacies of our world. Socrates on the other hand, admonished others to learn about the "truth of the being" through embedded images so as to guide oneself from falsehood or deceitfulness. E. Kant also investigated the notion of symbols and he understood it as a spiritual element that facilitates great comprehension of our present world from the spiritual perception (Toscano, 2005).

Gibson (1998) posits that symbols were core elements of religious activities; they opined that symbols were used to educate

and express sacred religious activities and processes. Gibson further researched and discovered that the late caves of the Palaeolithic era of Spain, France, Altamira and Lascaux were adorned with certain sacred symbols. He observed that certain symbols like animals and abstract geometric art forms were used to express cosmic traditions or values and certain cultural aspirations or wishes. Gibson therefore concluded that the complexities and sacredness found in religion were embedded in symbols which communicates out to our unconscious minds and transcends language barriers. To him, symbols are complex and powerful forms of communication that can be absorbed easily in the mind through simple graphics. Gibson identifies that in different cultures, symbols are powerful communicators which might be either mysterious or contain cultural knowledge because they have inherent sacredness attributed to them. He illustrates this with the Egyptian hieroglyphics and the symbols of the Greco-Roman religions, he observed that the meanings were peculiar to a particular culture, had secretive connotations, mysterious and were powerful communicative elements.

Scholars have also examined the universality of certain colour symbols in cultures. While colour symbols can be an expression of a certain culture, scholars such as Usunier (2000) and Jung (1964) have identified that they can be universal. Usunier illustrated the symbolic use of most bright and dark colours to have connotations. They opine that there is human collective unconsciousness to the universality of colour symbols across cultures.

Colours represent peoples view and discernment of the world. It's embedded in their cultural connotations and it holds a lot of emotions with different types of physical properties. Colours represent an insidious kind of communication which is carefully chosen. They help get a message across that would otherwise be difficult to express and perhaps appear less credible in words alone (Fraser and Banks, 2004).

Human civilisation as found in the Yorùbá and the Chinese cultures has developed certain colour symbols which are used as

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means of communicating their societal values, traditions and custom. Some of them are mysterious because they cannot be easily explained while others have their sacredness embedded in them either through their religious beliefs or societal norms. Their evolution can be traced to historical antecedents or age-longed traditional connotations while upholding strong cultural affinities among a societal group. Colours permeate every realm of culture and the Yorùbá and Chinese societies are not left out of the political, social, economic and religious lives of the people. For example, politically, we can see the use of colour symbols in the national flags of Nigeria and China and many other nations. Nigeria adopted the green-white-green colours at independence to connote agriculture (green) and peace and unity (white) (Ajibádé and Ojah, 2007). The Chinese on the other hand adopted the colours red and gold stars. The big gold star on the Chinese flag represents the Chinese community party and the four gold stars represents the economic classes of the state, they are the workers, peasants, petty bourgeoisie and the patriotic capitalists (Allan, 2009).

This work intends to scrutinize the use of colours as cultural symbols among the Yorùbá and the Chinese societies. It raises questions such as do the Yorùbá and the Chinese have colour symbols with the same inferred meaning? Are colour symbols universal in these two cultures? How have colour symbols been expressed in these two cultures? In attempting to address these questions, it intends to explore the religious, mythical, historical and cultural meanings these cultural groups have attributed to colours. It expects to reveal the significance and the inherent roles colours have as powerful symbolic elements of communication and the transmitter of cultural values. Lastly, this work will conclude by bringing out the universal accepted symbolic notions of colours among the two societies.

Literature review

The notion of symbols has been widely researched and exemplified by scholars of various disciplines. The word symbol itself was derived from the Greek word "symbolon" which means token or a watch word (Kaliyev, 2005). Cassirer, Krois & Orth (1987) examines the multidisciplinary connotations of the word symbol and they observed that the mathematician, logician and the linguistics scholar have interpreted it as philosophy, arts and a character which might come in the form of explaining the nature and the qualities of phenomena or objects. Firth (2011) asserts that symbols mediate between the notion of hidden meanings which is deep as a concept and artistic images which has an obvious factual meaning. Hewitt (1994) perceives symbols as when organisms create signs and they give them significance. To him, a symbol can be arbitrary because its meaning and significance is mainly attributed to those who agree to the formation and the use of it. Symbols come in different forms such as body postures, movements, objects, flags, paintings or linguistic forms. They transcend time and space and they can be used to signify historical periods or a particular period of a time in future. Zafiu (1996) defines symbols as the concrete image which has created its own vitality through the use of a specific correspondence and an abstract sense. To him, the symbol can be perceived from two perspectives: the person who discovers it or the person that uses it. In the perspective of the discoverer, symbols are seen as instruments of a mystical disclosure or a psychological action while in the opinion of the symbolic user; it conveys indirect meanings and transmits them.

Wellek & Warren (1967) opines that symbols exist because humans have the ability to create new ideas or to assign images to represent such ideas, to him, they are generally found in the traditions of the human race. Marino (1980) while discussing his notion of symbols in relation to the traditions of human race inferred that symbols were used as signs that were initially used in the deepest cosmic zones to decipher absolute realities. As such symbols exists in ritual creations which are found in folklore, incantations, carols and magical gestures that demonstrate a linguistic sign which offers

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explanations of gestures, attitudes and objects while holding vital interpretation of their significances (Ursache, 1976). Durand (1963) also upholds the notions that symbols have significances and expressiveness because they have certain homogeneity of the signifier and are captured within the dynamism of a certain cultural framework. Saussure (1998) also identifies with the collaboration between symbols and the signifier; symbols according to him are driven by motivational forces that intend to interpret it verbally or non-verbally.

Solomon (1983) examines the notion of cultural symbols and he infers that they are drivers that assist us in the interpretation of the social realities that we find ourselves; it enables us to give the world a meaning. It equips us with the beliefs that our interpretation of reality is consistent with that of others. To him, symbols exert their meaning since the birth of an individual and the socialisation process is continual and developed over time. Berger (1989) argues that human communication over the centuries had been done through symbolic means, words, signs and symbols that have been radiated through cultures. Pierce (1972) posits that symbols serve the purpose of communication between the members of any given community, since the communication is the sine qua non of any human society. Ushe (2012) opines that traditional African societies used traditional signs and symbols which were dynamic human activities that touch every domain of living for meaningful development and peaceful co-existence. Dunn et al (1990) expounds further by saying that signs transmitted through words or even pictures have many inherent meanings, the most common being denotative, connotative and contextual. The denotation of a sign is the reality that involves the literal association of signs with what they represent. The connotation of a sign pertains to secondary and subjective realities designed by the sign as well as eventual evaluations, which are associated with primary or secondary realities depending on the society. The contextual meaning which includes mental, visual or oral connotation

is influenced by the context in which the messages appear, and more often than not, the factors determining the understanding of the senders' message are rooted in cultural signs and symbols.

Cultural symbols are therefore the physical manifestation that signifies the ideology of a particular culture or that merely has meaning within a culture. For example, in Christianity has the cultural symbol of the cross, Islam has the moon and the star while the Jewish culture has the Star of David as its cultural symbol. Cultural symbols do not have to be actual symbols or signs; they may also be animals, fruits, plants, gestures such as hand signals and handshakes (Gonzalez, 2018).

Jenkins (1996) on the other hand describes symbols as being abstract to a degree, imprecise to a degree, always multifaceted, and frequently implicit or taken for granted in their definition. As a consequence, people can to some degree bestow their own meaning on and in symbols. They can say and do the same things without saying or doing the same things at all. Dragomirescu (1995) also perceives symbol as a figure of speech by which an abstract idea is expressed with the help of the name of the object belonging to the physical or animal world, on the basis of an easily perceived analogy. Negrici (1988) opines that symbols are mediating words places in the text to keep the reader close, in an attempt to determine him to keep looking for the idea. Damaso (1977) defines symbols from the perspective of continuity. To him; symbols can be embedded in words such as poems or include a few stanzas, respectively verses. Coteanu (1973) sees symbols as being the sign which sends to the object by another sign. Morrier (1961) classifies symbols into two categories in his bid to expound on the notion of the symbols. To him, we have conventional and contingent symbols. He mentions that some images that appear in dreams and which have a symbolic significance, as they would express relations to the sexual instinct repressed by shame.

Turner (1967) adopts three fields of meaning to conceptualise the notion of symbols. Firstly, he adopted the indigenous interpretation or exegetical meaning to view symbols. Exegetical

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meaning has three bases, a nominal base that derives from associations with the name of the symbol, a substantial base that derives from natural and material properties of objects used as symbols and finally an artefactual base in the case of made symbols. Secondly, he adopted the operational meaning and lastly, he viewed the positional meaning to elucidate the meaning of symbols. He posited that the exegetical meaning is given by the native commentary. The operational meaning of a symbol is equivalent to its use and to the affective qualities that are linked to that use, example-aggressive sad, penitent, joyful, derisive and so on. The positional meaning derives from structural relationships that symbols have among themselves.

From the above literature, we can deduce that symbols are words, images or signs which have been found in the different traditions of the human race. They assist us in understanding and interpreting the social realities in which we find ourselves and allow us to give meanings to the world around us. Symbols are multifaceted in nature and they radiate the value of a particular culture or ethnic group.

Theoretical Framework

This research work is hinged on symbolic interactionism as postulated by George Herbert Mead (1863-1931). Mead (1973) is considered the founder of symbolic interactionism and he made significant breakthroughs in trying to understand the basic properties of human social interaction. Mead argued that the most important conceptual building block on which symbolic interactionism have based their analysis of human conduct is the concept of the symbol or as Mead called it, the significant symbol. A significant symbol is a vocal or other kind of gesture that arouses in the one using it the same response as it arouses in those to whom it is directed. As a result of the ability to employ significant symbols, human beings interact with one another on the basis of meaning. Their response to one another

depend on the interpretation of symbols rather than merely on the enactment of responses they have been conditioned to make. Thus, they engage in symbolic interaction.

Mead explained the nature of symbols to include signs, objects and acts and social acts. Signs could be natural which is found only in 'natural' connection with the things for which they stand. To him, conventional signs are things or events associated with some other thing or event, but it is produced and controlled by the very organisms that have learned to respond to it. He posited that human language constitutes the most powerful set of conventional signs or symbols we can identify. Mead explained the notion of acts and social acts in interaction symbolism to call the attention of people to the interplay between the internal processes and external manifestations exhibited in human behaviour. His phases of human acts include impulse, perception, manipulation and consummation. Mead introduced the types of acts to include interaction with self in which there exists no social component, an interaction between human and the object or set of objects. He also opined interactions with others (social acts) which involves the cooperation of more than one individual, and whose object as defined by the act is a social object. For people to engage in social interaction, and thus complete the social object of a social act, they must first be able to interpret-assign meaning to one another's act. According to Mead, meaning is triadic.

The work of Mead is very important in this research work because it shows how colours have become important symbols in two traditional societies. It also explains how meanings have been attributed to colour through human interactions. Mead argued that human language creates the most powerful conventional symbols that we can identify, these are based on the human internal processes and external manifestations.

Methodology

This research work adopts qualitative method to examine this study. It intends to adopt different text analysis and scholarly work to

understand the cultural significance of colours in these two main societies', China and Nigeria. As such, data were collected from two databases. First the internet was applied in the download of relevant materials as regards to colour symbols while focus was on the Yorùbá and the Chinese cultural connotations. Relevant concepts and ideas were selected from both sources through critical case sampling and content analysis. While colours with distinctive symbol connotations were selected for this study, it also scrutinized them through a comparative enquiry across these two cultures. Critical case sampling was used to investigate specific colours evident in these cultures and the data were considered representative of these cultures' symbols.

Yorùbá Cultural Colour Connotations

The traditional Yorùbá spectrum is made up of three primary colours; pupa (red), dúdú (black) and funfun (white) out of which other secondary colours such as tópolá (yellow), àyínrín (blue), pink, scarlet and green magenta are generated (Fádípè, 1970). Fádípè points out further that colour are very important in the Yorùbá traditional society because it is used for various purposes.

Red also known as pupa, symbolizes danger, anger and the violence that prevails in the society. It's associated with the god of iron, Ògún and the god of thunder, Şàngó due to their volatile and temperamental character. It is seen as the colour of fire which connotes danger, wickedness and an unmerciful nature. It marks unstable characters because of its inherent connotation of hotness and fiery characteristics. In Yorùbá religion, shrine worshippers use red painting to signify love and affection towards their deities who they believe are in control of their world (Fálolá and Akínyemí, (Eds.) (2017).

In Yorùbá culture, Black (dúdú) is a colour that is associated with the ancestors and gods they worship. It is also associated with certain mystical and spiritual forces such as the Devil (Èşù), the trickster, a divinity known for his dubious, tricky, mischievous and

wicked character. Black has a lot of negative connotations such as death (ikú), sorrow (ibànújé) and misfortune (oríburúkú). It is also seen as the colour of the secret and occult world and its psychological connotation means a down-to-earth, practical, earthy sort of personality (Àrémú, 1997). Adéjùmò (2002) argues that Black represents defilement, mourning and destruction because it is used to signify Èṣù, who is believed to be a potential mischief-maker and promoter of malice and confusion. Adélékè (2009) views the black costumes of Èṣù at both the physiological and the psychological realms. At the former, it may imply the unrefined and crude aspect of human culture; at the latter it may suggest the sub consciousness of the human mind in using Freudian theory. Adéoyè (1979) also maintains that Èṣù can only be identified with black, however Adélékè (2009) further argues that in real Yorùbá mythology which is free from Western or Judaeo-Christian sentiments, Èṣù appears in black and red, or black and white. He appears in two colours at a time which identifies him (Èṣù) as a mediator-fool. Other Yorùbá gods have their favourite colours; thus, red is for Ṣàngó, white for Ọbàtálá and indigo for Ọrúnmìlá among others (Adéoyè, 1979, Adélékè, 2009).

The colour white is regarded as a symbol of purity and it represents the sacred nature of the gods. It is the colour of Olódùmarè, the creator of heaven and earth. It is also attributed to the arch divinity Ọbàtálá, the Yorùbá god of creativity who is seen as being pure and righteous. The purity of white colour makes it to be used at weddings and funerals as well because it also connotes a peaceful feeling. Yorùbá people wear white attires to show that they haven't participated in any form of evil acts (Forde, 2017). Adéjùmò (2002) discusses the traditional role of colour in Yorùbá culture. She holds that funfun (white) is used by the Yorùbá to symbolize light and the transparent nature of the spirit world, being the colour that represents Ọbàtálá, the creator deity of the Yorùbá mythology who assists Olódùmarè, the Supreme Being in the shaping of man's physiological features.

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Adéléké (2009) highlights the importance and contextualization of colours in Yorùbá culture. He notes that the following colours: blue, yellow, green, red and black not only perform the functions of beautification and identity but they as well serve as communicative tools that transcend the surface verbal discourse. He observes that colours can be given specific meanings in certain contexts to acquire significance and act as signals in order to carry out certain intended meanings.

From the above, we can see that different colours in Yorùbá culture hold different unique symbolic significance, while some of them have positive attributes others have negative connotations. It has also been observed that some of the colours like black are located within the folklore of this culture while holding strong religious importance and significance. Colours in this culture have also been used for categorisation of the supernatural and the physical world.

Chinese Colour Cultural Connotations

In Chinese culture, colours are tools of non-verbal communication about its culture, custom and traditions. Red is a significant and vital colour that plays an overwhelming influence on the life of the people. In Chinese perception, red is the colour of the sun and the sun radiates brightness to mankind, it also provides the energy for all plants to grow. According to Chinese ancestors, they had immense feelings for the colour red due to this significant and mainly because they were agriculturalist. Red indeed has many connotations in Chinese culture, for instance it signifies loyalty, happiness, luck, prosperity and many festive meanings. During Chinese festivals, red plays a dominant role as they are used as red envelopes, red posters, and everywhere is adorned with red. During weddings, the bride and groom are expected to be dressed in red to signify good luck, fortune and prosperity for their marriage. Red candles, red veil and red characters are mainly used during traditional marriages in China. Politically, red is the symbol of the Chinese revolution. The Chinese flag is immersed in

red colour and the armed forces of the Communist Party are called the Red Army. Another inherent connotation of the colour red is seen in traditional times, red was also a symbol of jealousy and envy (Haijiang, 2004).

In ancient China, Yellow symbolises the colour of the imperial majesty, it was an exclusive colour to the feudal emperor and the people were banned from using it freely. Most of the imperial ornaments were ordained in Yellow, the imperial edict was called the 'Yellow list' and the imperial robe was Yellow as well. Traditionally, Yellow is an honourable colour and its significance varies. Yellow is revered in China and is reserved for royalty and the high priests; yellow also represents the gods and power. According to legend, Yellow became the symbol for the earth and creation because of the yellow soil in northern China, home of the earliest ruling dynasties. Yellow is also a symbol of luck and auspicious, the Chinese themselves are referred to the descendants of the Yellow river and they are called Yellow skin people. In modern times, yellow has also a derogatory cultural connotation; it is often associated with obscenity and pornography (Neil, 2012).

Green in Chinese culture holds both positive and negative symbolic meanings. From ancient China, especially in China's Forbidden City, green roof tiles cover the wing where the young princes resided. A Chinese tradition holds that to dream about green things is a sign that good fortune is on its way, but if the colour pervades the entire dream, it signifies that he would soon find himself in peril. In China, soft jade greens are influenced by nature and are highly prized. On the other hand, many words in Chinese contain derogatory meanings. Green was a symbol of inferiority and as such lower officials were dressed in green clothing. Green could also symbolize people who were shameful and humble; the word 'green hat' meant to be a 'cuckold' which meant one's wife was with another man. In modern times, green food or go green is associated with ecology or healthy food (Liao, 2011).

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In traditional China, black was a symbol of integrity, fortitude, solemnity and selflessness. It was a symbol of solemn and seriousness. Traditional Chinese opera mask represents righteousness, upright and outspokenness. However, in modern China, the colour black is often associated with negative qualities in Chinese culture. Black symbolises the idea of darkness, danger rebellion. It also symbolises all forms of illegality one can think of, it represents all forms of shady deals and it stands for shame, failure or discredit (Yuang, 2012).

The Chinese attribute white to peace and success, a successful period is called the white moment of life; they believed that white pigeons were reputation of peace. White also means aged in Chinese, thus the elderly were seen with white hair. It could also symbolize anxious, sad, frightened or irritated and could mean an indication of contempt. On the other hand, white could mean impoverishment, illiteracy and innocence. It is also a symbol of death. White is the colour of mourning dress and therefore symbolizes death. It therefore represents a taboo colour and an old omen. During funeral sessions, the relatives of the deceased must wear white mourning clothes and a white flower in the chest, set up white mourning hall and sprinkle white paper money. It is perceived in China that white colour gives a feeling of colourless, thus the meaning of empty and nothing was derived (Jiang, 2002).

In Chinese traditional culture, blue was the term for the indigo plant from which the blue was extracted. There were some phrases with blue had derogatory meanings as blue coats indicates someone was born in a poor family in lowly family. But the Chinese people have a good feeling of blue now. The blue sky can inspire people's vision of the future, and the blue sea can draw people's infinite imagination (Hu, 2005).

From the above, we have observed that the symbolic importance of colour in this culture changes from time to time. It's

also deeply rooted in the ancient folklore of this tradition while passing on ancient values across generations.

Findings

This research work has depicted that both the Yorùbá and the Chinese culture use colours as a means of cultural communication of their values, beliefs and traditions. Colours have been used to transmit their beliefs from generation to generation. It also illustrated that colours can communicate more than one meaning in a culture, it may be a positive and negative meaning at the same time. It was also portrayed that the cultural meaning given to colours can actually be conceived by the signifier in his cultural context. This work also observed that colours are associated to the supernatural. In Yorùbá culture, certain gods have colours attributed to them, for instance Šàngó (red), Ọ̀bàtálá (white), Ọ̀rúnmìlà (Indigo) while Chinese ancestors revere certain colours thereby attributing certain positive traits to them.

Furthermore, this work revealed that colours in both cultures have long cultural histories. Yorùbá and Chinese colour connotations can be traced back to historical times and era. However, when red symbolises a negative trait in the Yorùbá culture, it signifies a positive trait in the Chinese culture. Red in Yorùbá culture symbolises violence, anger, danger and bad temperament while in Chinese culture red stands for good luck, happiness and prosperity.

This work also perceived that colours are used for cultural activities, occasions or festive activities. In Chinese culture, during the spring festival, red is a popular colour to be used. In worship of deities in Yorùbá culture, red is also a popular colour to be used in the shrine or during worship. At wedding ceremonies, both cultures use colour white for the bride and the bridegroom. During funerals, black and white are symbolic colours for death and purity simultaneously.

In both cultures, black signifies a negative colour and often associated with ill-luck and unfaithful circumstances. In Yorùbá culture, it represents the colour of the occult world and represents mystical and spiritual forces. In Chinese culture, it represents illegal acts and forms of rebellions while signifying danger.

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Both cultures have some similar symbolic significance for colour white, this is seen as a positive colour for the people. In Yorùbá culture, white represents purity, sacredness and righteousness while in the Chinese culture it signifies both positive and negative traits. On one hand, white in Chinese culture represents success and peace, it also signifies longevity and on the other hand, it represents death.

Lastly, these connotations of colours in the Yorùbá and Chinese culture escape all forms of scientific proof or logical explanation because they are based on cultural and traditional perceptions of cultures. It's a strong belief that is widely held, acceptable and practised in these two cultures across the spectrum of time.

Conclusion

Colours have offered us greater insights into the culture, traditions and values of two different but unique societies, the Chinese and the Yorùbá. They have increased our knowledge about the spiritual and the physical world while holding strong religious connotations in these two cultures. Colours therefore are symbols of the physical, spiritual and the religious world. Colours have also been used in religions and different cultural traditions or ceremonies, as such colours represent symbols of sacredness in one culture while symbolising a complex trait in another. Colours have been used in these traditional as tools of communication.

One inherent observation of this research work is that colours serve as powerful, unexplainable, mysterious and secretive symbols of cultures that have different symbolic meanings and attributes. This perhaps is a universal trait of colours as symbol in both cultures. The reasons why they hold these attributes of negative or positive traits cannot be comprehended or explainable but is widely accepted as a juxtaposition of the cultural beliefs of this cultural group. The symbols given to colours in these societies have been made possible

by humans when expressing their own cultural realities. Finally, colours as cultural symbols have facilitated social interaction, communication and preservation of traditional values, customs and traditions over the years.

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